



SUMMER FEVER AND OTHER VERSES



Norman F. Priestley



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by

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IN the years 1922 to 1929 while living at Coaldale just east of Lethbridge, the prairie-farm scene in Alberta grew upon me to such an extent that I "broke out into verse". Though busy with the affairs of a rural church and community I found some time to read a little of the modern poets and came to have a liking for their free forms of verse. It was to these forms rather than the classical that I turned for expression. Some of this verse appeared in the official paper of the United Farmers of Alberta, *The U.F.A.* Mr. W. Norman Smith, now editor of *The Western Farm Leader*, was kind enough to judge them worthy of publication. They were reproduced by other journals. In consequence of their wide distribution in *The U.F.A.* many persons who read them at that time have voiced a wish to see them in one collection. To meet the wishes of these friends and members of my family, eleven that relate to life on the prairie are here brought together, in the hope that they will give pleasure to those who read them.

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Calgary, Alberta



SUMMER FEVER

Let us go out and look at the wheat!
It fascinates me utterly.
Its green-gold waves sweep over me.
Like a miser with his gold
I run my fingers through it,
Assuring me of its reality.
Through it I walk,
Around it I ride,
It quite possesses me.

I've worked for it many days,
Dreamed of it many nights,
Awaited it many years.
Instead of the wealth of green and gold of my desires,
I've found the brown and ugly poverty of weeds and thistles.
I have sweat on those fields;
For them my heart has sweat blood.

No rain came.
The sere and pallid straw bore us no wheat.
My wife wept bitter tears.
My babies lacked clothes and even bread.
My babies, grown to boys and girls, learned heartache too.
They knew the frustration of hope.

News comes of hail.
They speak of "missiles of ice".
They tell of green fields lashed and smashed to pulp.
Men have gone insane at the sight.
On sultry days fear clutches at my heart.
High Heaven hurl hot hail!

Though I have schooled myself throughout the years
To see reward withheld for all my toil,
Defeat of hope has been but gradual.

Each day succeeding day of summer winds,
Not harsh, yet much like men of fairest face,
Working in secret to my hurt,
Has robbed me without violence.

To see the dream of years come true;
To have within my hand the hard won prize;
And see it roughly torn from out my eager grasp;
To know possession's joy, only to be deprived;
Helpless to strike a blow in its defence;
God pity my weakness! 'twere more than I could bear.

Once more grant me the glad music of the harvest!
Give me to ride high behind my team above the reaper!
To hear the hum of wheels and gears!
To see the paddles of the reel gently lay low
Before the sickle bar the golden grain!
To look behind and see the sheaves,
Ordered confusion waiting the stooker's hand!
To tire myself, my men, my teams,
Till the glorious work is done!
I ask no better heaven, just now.

Let me rise before the sun,
Let me fall asleep under the stars
Dreaming of golden grain.
Let me sing with joy seeing the golden sea
Grow less and less each day.
Till the sickle bar lays low its last thin wave.
Let me hear the bull wheel crunch the gravel of the yard
As the last reaper comes home to wait another year.

Grant me to hear again the chugging engine
And early morning call of the threshing crew,
Clear and sharp through the green-gold skies of dawn.
Give to my wife and girls the glad task
Of feeding hungry men turning into gold
The stook-stippled stubble that was golden sea.

Grant me to hear the tuneful swish
Of each half bushel as it descends the spout.
Give to my boys to stand knee deep,
'Mid berries of gold, rising like a tide
To top of wagon and of granary;
And see it pour, a cascade of wealth,
A flood of golden food, into the hungry mouth
Of a wondering world.

Some day, God willing, within a week or two.
To yonder town I'll go and buy some clothes,
My first new suit in many years.
Into the bank, a place of dread
Full many a dreary day, I'll go,
Another kind of man, strange almost to myself.
Not beggar-like, my heart shrunken and small,
But, proud with pride of possession,
I shall put my name on the line,
I shall write large figures there,
Marks with a pen that shall make me free.

Burdens of many years shall be laid down,
Shackles and fetters that have bound us long
Shall fall away.
Homeward bound with buoyancy like that of youth,
I shall see the light of gladness come
To erstwhile fading eyes.
The home we have fought to keep
Shall be ours, all ours, once more,
No shadow of debt darkening its door.

We shall hold festival.
Where we trod quietly, with sober look,
By poverty subdued,
We shall go in and out with joy.

Come! I have talked too long,
Let us go out and look at the wheat.

SPRING EXPECTANCY



*The spring upon the prairie is, to me,
A time of indescribable expectancy.
It rolls so far away in gentle mood.
Its seeming boundlessness nearing infinitude.
No place of fragrant, mossy dells, where dance
The fairies and the elves to Zephyr's tuneful stance;
Yet something magical out there it lies,
Bathed in its wine-like air, beneath the cloud-flecked skies.*

*It is the magnitude, the splendid scale,
That fascinates me most in springtime's prairie tale.
Where men in older lands turn in and out
Upon ancestral patches, walled and hedged about,
Using the ancient spade or single hoe,
Or trudging furrows deep, their hands upon the plough.
Sowing each seed with cautious, careful hand,
The prairie farmer lays king's tribute on the land.*

*Yes! like a king or viking old he rides.
Upon an iron corsair bold he cleaves the tides.
A full score manes and tails float on the breeze
When from his barn in spring he sails the prairie seas.
The prairie sullen lies, he cracks his mighty whip,
Transforms the very seas each journey in his ship.
Holding his champing eager steeds in check,
Watching the dark brown waves that churn beneath the deck.*

Or, Titan-like, he stands between the wheels,
A squadron of machines behind his iron heels;
Discing and harrowing and seeding too,
Showing the stubble fields a man's will to subdue;
Chugging and snorting far across the plain;
Swirling around the ends and ramping back again.
A giant, wonderful, is he to me,
The forbear of a world of men yet to be free.

For this grim man in overalls and shirt,
When free from pressing task of turning prairie dirt,
Looks out upon horizons far and wide,
Has joined hands with his kind from east to western tide,
Is working to great ends and will not heed,
Till Nature's latent powers are matched to hunger's need;
And no more shall the servile worker bend
At soul-destroying toil till age brings on his end.

And so each prairie springtime is, to me,
A time of great, yes, wondrous great, expectancy.
To see each new machine, new form of power,
To see, more clearly still, that nearer comes the hour
When bread bins the world over shall be filled;
And in the art of living well men shall be skilled,
Using aright the rich returns that God
Has given to the earth, since man first turned the sod.



FAITH

*Winter has passed
And left but little snow.
The south west wind
Whips dry the land.
The farmer now
Furrows his brow,
While furrowing the soil,
His mind again possessed
With doubts of due reward
For all his toil.*

*But hope is in the air,
The best of years
Comes back into his mind
An antidote for fears.
The ground was then so dry
He scarce knew how
To turn it, and
Called himself
A fool to plow.*

*Yet hardly had he done
His meed of work.
Grimly planting seed,
Determined not to shirk,
When rains abundant
Drenched his upturned land.
And, in a hundred days,
Wheat waved on every hand.*

TUMBLE WEED

*How like the rolling tumble weed
Some sons of men!
Maturing swift in barren homes
To boyhood; then,
Scarce rooted in the kinsfolk soil,
Some wayward wind
Tears loose the feeble roots
That hold them to their kind.*

*Across the plains of life
Directionless they spin,
Sport of the social strife,
No ruling force within.
Some fence or circumstance arrests them
On their way.
Dry, bleached, bereft of seed, they
Settle to decay.*



NEW LIFE

*Spring breathed its breath on me,
Something within me stirred
With hum of questing bee
And whirr of winging bird.*

*To glistening bursting leaf,
The thrusting blade of grass.
To buds within the sheath,
The ant-hill's busy mass.*

*Clear call of blue, blue sky,
Mysterious march of cloud.
The city's hum nearby,
The passing of the crowd,*

*Some vital spark of life
Grew warm again in me.
Imagination rife
Pictured the years to be.*

MUSINGS ON THE TRAIN

*Snow-covered undulations,
Etched fine in light and shade
By winter's setting sun!
A phase of Nature's rhythm!
No one bold upstanding crest,
Outshading darkly all the rest,
A harmony of white and grey,
Its counterpart the cloud-flecked sky.*

*Within those shadowed hills,
A box-like edifice
Some humans call their home.
In spring, the breadwinner
Will write his lines of hope and toil
In straight black furrows of the soil.
To him the plowing knows no swerve.
The hillocks give it line and curve.*

*Men, merely men, in such a scene
Are not much more than mice,
Viewed from this passing train.
From out their holes of homes
They move amid immensity,
A challenge to Infinity.
Though short-lived things of flesh and blood
Scratching Earth's age old crust for food.*

*But Man has great significance
As Man, in this vast land.
He plots it into square of miles
Spans it with road and rail;
Denotes it in his flying 'plane—
"Alberta" or "Saskatchewan".
Let Man to life more meaning give,
That men a nobler life may live.*

THE FIRST FROST OF THE FALL

*You touch the trees with beauty.
Your lightly passing robe
Trails hues of flame.*

*Your fantastic feather fabric,
Woven on the window's warp,
Fills with light of joy
The waking eyes of our child.*

*The sportsman, early out,
Seeking brief respite
From canyons of noise and dust,
Somnolent in summer's sun,
Fills his stifled lungs
With health-giving breath.*

*For me! Beauty and ashes!
I was late at work in the spring.
Rains delayed me.
Wild oats grew.
Harrowing fiercely,
I prayed a longer summer.*

*Would you had waited a while!
Waited but one more week!
My golden grain!
My acres of wealth!
Winter's bread for a town,
Is now straw, mere straw.*

*Why all of my fields?
Would not one suffice?
Were not some narrow path enough
For your whim of wandering?*

*Your visit was brief as sunrise,
Swift as the whistling flight
Of south-bound ducks, passing high.
I am left startled, amazed.
Regret will linger through years.*

*What a fair summer!
What opulent showers!
How ardent the sun!
And now! this chilly dawn!
It is as though some brief sin
Had fouled forever a fair name.*

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THE GOOSE HUNT

*The strident call of the alarm,
An unmelodious bell,
Wakes me from sleep.
A moment's irritation,
Then, joyous recall
Of plans laid late last night,
Of gun and shells,
Deep boots, thick socks,
A sportsman's readiness
To beat the dawn.*

*Sliding with stealth from out the bed,
I leave the good wife deep in dreams,
Quite heedless of my hunter's haste.
Checking with care each needed thing,
To the shed I go; and, presently,
I tear great rips in night's dark robe,
And rouse the sleeping cock close by,
With the engine's muffled roar.*

*I am away! Off to the hunt!
With two great eyes of light
I pierce the night;
And speed along their beams
Toward the east,
To the farm of a friend, a kindred soul,
Whose lantern glow, amid weird shadows
Tells me he is abroad.*

*Pockets filled with food to munch,
Shovels and picks within the car,
Decoys, and sheaves of grain,
We sail across a stubble sea,
Scattering frost aside
Like spray at the bows of a ship,
And haul beneath the lee
Of a huge stack of straw,
Looming like a rounded iceberg,
Between us and the east.*

*Out go the lights, as by some ghostly hand.
With secret counsel held as to the way,
Bulky with burdens, we trudge toward a lake,
A streak of smoky light 'mid sombre shade.
Deciding where the flock of greys had fed,
Before the sun red-rimmed with his last rays
The peaked perimeter of our prairie world,
We set to work, eager to be done.*

*The king-commander of the world's new day
Soon sends his scouts across our chosen field,
And will make foolish yet our uncompleted plans.
We must dig in. All must be still.
Ply pick and spadel Like three mad sextons,
Pressed by pestilence, proving each other's powers,
Down deep we dig, willingly, thrillingly,
Holes that are not graves; 'til room is found
For gun and bended knees; and we make pause.*

*Some wisdom learned, from many a futile chase,
Knowing the nature of the bird,
Whose outstretched neck and piercing eye
Has spied our secret hide.
At many a luckless dawn,
We careful spread the earth; and cover sly
With wisps of straw and plucked up stubble roots
The signs of our dark deeds.
Self-effacing, silent, we wait the coming day.*

*O peaceful, quiet world! circling silently!
Speck of star-dust to some celestial seer.
In his distant Milky Way!
Of what more moment we and our excitement of the night
Than that leaf-rustling mouse which scuttles by,
Afraid of this strange thing upon its path?*

*Be quiet questing mind! Mark morn's magnificence!
The scintillating signs of soundless music,
Written bright on night's revolving dome,
Are fading out, giving way to the song of day.
Hark! In the east! A sound! And answering sounds!
A haunting, honking call, that thrills a hunter's heart!*

Light grows. Shadows lessen.

Grey-blue, green-gold, the garments of day are spread,

Before the king of day reveals his jocund face.

The lake lies like a looking-glass of light,

Wherein the leaning hills themselves may see

To smooth away the traces of the night.

Again the honking call! My heart skips beats,

And quickly catches them again.

The sound of flapping wings,

Rising from water,

Is borne across the fields;

And each man crouches low,

Whispering hoarsely to his mate, "They come".

Peering through a hole amid the straw,

I see a wavy line across the sky,

Veering toward our birds of painted tin.

No stir, scarcely a deep-drawn breath,

Until the swirl of beating wings o'erhead.

Then, loud report of guns, dull thuds,

And echoes answering from hill to hill.

Five lordly birds have fallen to our hand,

Fit feast for many families,

None better on the banquet board of kings.

Now homeward heading, heart with wonder filled

At silver patterns on Alberta's western wall,

Reaction comes, my morning ardour chilled.

Shall some still dawn, when life flies full and free,

No thought within to meet so fearful, fateful fall,

Find the dark huntsman ambushed there for me?

Wing on then soaring soul! hazards forever o'er,

To that eternal dawn, that sun-lit, softer shore,

To that free-flying field, where death awaits no more!

SNOW CAPPED SHEAVES

*A coin dropped from your hand?
You have lost it in the snow?
The winter wind whipped from you
A dollar bill or so?
Come! Lift the corners of your mouth!
Things might be worse, you know.*

*Poor city man! hurrying
From home to store,
From store to banks,
Depositing your daily gain,
Returrtng home and worrying
It were not more.
You've cause for thanks,
Come winter's snow or summer's rain.*

*Come with me to the farm!
Our coach will carry us in comfort
Over the hard dry road of glistening snow.
Stay! I was dreaming. The illusion
Of a car, with its ease and speed,
Its shelter from the biting blasts of winter,
Had come to be almost a reality with me.
My team, the sleigh-box full of straw,
Awaits us round the corner. Let us go.*

*You were here in the fall, and saw our fields of wheat.
A swishing, sunlit sea of gleaming, golden grain.
Waiting expectantly the musical murmur of the machine
That should lay it low, and bind it firm
Until the thresher's winnowing
Should make mountains of the straw, and pour
The precious kernels, a life sustaining stream,
Into the bread bins of a hungry world.*

Before you lie those fields, in silvery silence,
Sealed these many weeks with winter's cold hard seal.
The secret whisperings of spring, the summer's sunny song,
Fall's lilting laughter too, lie hushed beneath a crust of snow.
The sheaves the stooker stood in rhythmic order, row on row,
Mock me daily, like the frozen snow-capped waves
Of a dreary Arctic landscape, some artist's crazy dream.

I laid great plans in the fall.
The copious rains of summer,
Alberta's early-rising and late-setting sun,
Brought to maturity, though somewhat slow,
A fuller harvest than fancy's farthest flights
Had led me to expect or hope.
I saw myself again, a man set free
From the cumbering cares of poverty.

I lay awake at nights, and filed away
The discharged mortgage of the farm,
And banker's note with interest fully met.
I went to town and purchased with great pride
The hat and gown for which my wife had longed.
There passed before my fancy's eyes
A line of modern coaches glitteringly new,
Into one of which she stepped and drove away,
A princess of the farm, her youth renewed.
Beauty again aglow upon her faded cheek.

I sent my boy to college, and my girls.
We set up homes for them, and wed them well;
The institutions of our rural life set firm;
The school and church repaired and painted new.
From out full purse, with free and liberal hand
I gave glad gifts to relatives and friends,
Who many years had known the pinch of need.

The dream, hope's fever, passed and gave place
To that delusion of our kind: "next year".
The stark reality faced me in November.
Winter had come. The soft falling flakes,
And later whirling drifts, locked in cold embrace
My golden harvest, my wealth laden fields.
For some months more, unless a warm Chinook
From the great Pacific's sun-kissed sea
Shall drive away the snow and dry the grain,
We must eat simple fare, and wear the clothes
Of humbleness and meet frugality.

But cheer up, Friend! The year is on the turn.
Spring soon will come and snow shall disappear.
Our neighbours, who, more fortunate than we,
Gathered the bounteous harvest of the year,
And southward took their flight, like birds,
Seeking to sun themselves on softer shores,
Shall come back home and help us harvest too.
Sowing and reaping shall come together.
Two harvests in one year shall be
Long-living landmarks of glad memory.



BLOW! BLIZZARD, BLOW!

Blow! Blizzard, Blow!

From distant north in fiercest hurry sweep!
Thou canst not harm me now.

The harvest o'er, within my house I keep.
My prize stock sheltered, sleek, well fed,
In barns secure; the hay deep in the mow;
My wheat safe stored; I know no dread.

Blow! Blizzard, Blow!

Rage! Winter, Rage!

Lay down thy shining sheets of silver snow,
Where waving wheat swished like a sea of gold.
What though the mercury descend below!
In soft content I snugly dwell,
Like some rich epicure of old,
My cellar filled and pantry, well.
Rage! Winter, rage!

Howl, North Wind, howl!

Behind storm windows I can laugh at thee,
Venting thy fury on the tumble weed,
Bending and buffeting the poplar tree.
Thy gentler brother kept thee long at bay,
Till forty fold I reaped from spring sown seed.
And to the elevator hauled each day.
Howl! North Wind, howl!

Stay! North Wind, stay!
Abate thy fury ere it is too late.
In my content my neighbor I forgot,
This year again it seemed to be his fate,
To sow with fruitless seed his luckless field;
Prolonging, still, his long borne frugal lot;
His hopes destroyed with Autumn's meagre yield.
Stay! North Wind, stay!

Wait! Winter, wait!
My neighbor's children shiver at thy breath,
Their house an insufficient shell,
The father on the prairie fights with death,
Blinded, freezing, his will alone supreme,
Taking to town some provender to sell;
Determined still his losses to redeem.
Wait! Winter, wait!

Blow! Chinook, blow!
Rise passionate from out the south and west.
Press back the spectres of the north,
That chill the blood. Give hope to men oppressed.
Surges of summer put into their veins!
Proud consciousness of dignity and worth,
Till each the goal of his desire attains.
Blow, Chinook, blow!

RETIRING FROM THE FARM

*Red bills in the windows!
Green posters on the walls!
Through the village street a stream of life
Flowing toward our farm,
Out to the sale.*

*Old neighbors pass with grave salute,
Shy with pity for the day.
Secretly resolving to serve me well,
They scan once more the bills that bid them go
Out to the sale.*

*Strangers, scenting petty bargains from afar,
Rattle past in vehicles rickety with age.
Sleek looking men, intent on larger spoils
Slide smoothly by in ostentatious ease,
Out to the sale.*

*Boys almost men, hiding their gangling limbs
Astride some ramping colt,
Keenly conscious of their new found powers,
Make Main Street noisy, urging friends
Out to the sale.*

*Doubtless the sale goes on, if I am there or no.
I called it—the last assertion of my rights—
So I, my trifling business done
Join the procession too, and go
Out to the sale.*

*They line the fences at the gate, in rows
Almost as at a funeral.
They scurry on the lawn and trample beds
Where last year lovely blooms made sweet the air
Around the farm.*

*About the porch, in orderly disorder,
Lie things we purchased for the house in years gone by.
Here women estimate with care; the men more furtively.
Strange contrast to the peace a week ago
On our farm.*

*A strident voice, from near the workshop door, .
Dominates the crowd; who, faces raised,
Bid briskly for the tools and other things
With which these many years I worked
Upon the farm.*

*The crowd moves through the rough made aisles:
Implements, once red and green and gold,
For which I paid a fortune through the years,
Blocking the busy road each eager spring and fall,
Out to the farm.*

*They pull at levers long, test hidden gears;
And warily advance one hundredth part the cost.
In some strange foreign tongue at times,
Seeking to build a home with parts of mine
On their new farm.*

*Time comes to sell my team, my favorite, faithful pair.
They paw them over with unskilful hands;
And trot them round the ring to mark their style;
Discounting them for their years of toil
Making the farm.*

*The auctioneer strains all his selling art.
With many a joke, and not few jibes.
Inflections long and fateful hands raised high.
He seeks the little to conserve which I have gained,
Working the farm.*

*Within the house a few old, loyal friends,
Stricken to silence or feeble, fumbling words.
Spend sparingly the fading firelit hour;
Silvered hair and knotted hands, part of our life
About the farm.*

*Night shadows fall upon the yard.
Stranger and neighbor both depart.
Silent the voice which droned throughout the day
Persuading men, persistently, to pay.
Buying my farm.*

*Strangely quiet now the barns.
No horses crunching in the stalls;
No cow lowing by the hay,
No contented rustlings in the straw;
Sounds of the farm.*

*One night more, then far away.
To softer shores and easier tasks of age;
Where gray-haired men and women,
Stooped with many cares and years of useful toil,
Dream of the farm.*

